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TWO CAROLINGIAN IVORIES

AMONG the Pre-Gothic ivories in the Pierpont Morgan Collection, presented to the Metropolitan Museum in 1917, are two fine Carolingian plaques of the ninth century, which originally ornamented the covers of a book. As far as I have been able to ascertain, the ivories have never been published.

That the plaques, when they were carved in the ninth century, were designed for book-covers is certain. On the backs of the ivories are carvings several centuries earlier in date. These will be noticed later in more detail, but the fact is mentioned now as indicating that the plaques, when re-used in the Carolingian period, were intended from the first to be applied, as otherwise, the older carvings, which are incomplete in design, would undoubtedly have been erased.

The measurements of the Morgan plaques vary slightly. On the smaller of the two,¹ measuring 5 inches in height by $3\frac{1}{4}$ inches in width, Our Lord is represented seated on a throne, behind which stand St. Peter and St. Paul (Fig. 1). This scene is framed by a border of acanthus ornament. The Virgin holding the Christ Child is represented on the companion plaque,² which measures $5\frac{5}{8}$ inches in height by $3\frac{1}{2}$ inches in width (Fig. 2). Two angels, standing behind the throne, correspond to the Apostles on the other plaque. The acanthus ornament is somewhat different in design.

The plaques are carved in quite low relief, but with considerable plastic effect. An exaggerated impression of flatness is given by the photographs, in which the rubbing suffered by the ivories is more apparent than in the originals. The style in general is pictorial, and shows a dependence on manuscript illumination.

Close analogies in style and composition exist between the Morgan plaques and two ivories mounted on the modern covers of a Gospel³ in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris. Christ

¹ Accession No. 17.190.41

² Accession No. 17.190.39

³ Cod. lat. 323 (Exposé 265).

Enthroned is represented on one plaque; He gives a book to Paul who stands on His right, and keys to Peter, who stands on His left. Between the Apostles is a symbolic figure of Oceanus. Two angels complete the upper part of the composition. Except for the position of the hands, the Christ is very similar to that of the Morgan plaque, especially in the arrangement of the drapery. The second Paris plaque represents the Virgin Enthroned with the Child; two adoring angels appear above the back of the throne. The Morgan plaque with the same subject differs in



FIGURE 1.—CHRIST ENTHRONED; CAROLINGIAN IVORY PLAQUE: METROPOLITAN MUSEUM.

the pose of the angels, which are here shown only as busts, and in the form of the throne, but the Virgin and Child are practically identical in pose and costume with the Paris example. The



FIGURE 2.—THE VIRGIN AND CHILD ENTHRONED; CAROLINGIAN IVORY PLAQUE: METROPOLITAN MUSEUM.

similarity in technique is obvious. I have no doubt that both the Paris and the Morgan plaques came from the same atelier, if not from the same hand.

Goldschmidt, in his valuable work on Carolingian ivories,¹

¹ A. Goldschmidt, *Die Elfenbeinskulpturen, etc.* Vol. I, No. 71, a, b, Plate XXVIII.

publishes the Paris plaques and describes them as "Mitte des IX Jahrhunderts. Abzweigung der Liuthardgruppe," associating with them two similar plaques of the same date in the Victoria and Albert Museum.¹ These ivories, Goldschmidt points out, are related in style to both the "Liuthard" and "Metz" groups. The same observation may be made of the Morgan ivories.

The Paris plaques have much in common, stylistically, with the illuminations in the Gospel, on the covers of which they are now applied. It is quite likely that the manuscript and the ivories have the same provenance; which, presumably, is also the same for the plaques in the Victoria and Albert Museum and in the Pierpont Morgan Collection. The illuminations in the Paris Gospel may be associated with the so-called School of Corbie, but unfortunately, the location of this school is uncertain. The Paris Gospel is assigned by W. Köhler to the middle of the ninth century. This date we may safely adopt for the ivories of the group. As to provenance, however, although the Rhenish provinces may be suggested as the probable place of origin, the problem still awaits solution.

The carving on the back of the Morgan plaque with Christ Enthroned (Fig. 3) is incomplete at the top and bottom; the design on the back of the other plaque (Fig 4) is incomplete at the top only. It is possible that both ivories, when originally carved, formed part of one large panel, but it is more likely, since we find on one plaque a balanced design and on the other an arrangement decidedly informal in character, that parts of two panels were utilized by the Carolingian carver. Both panels, however, are alike in style, and probably ornamented a box or some other piece of furniture.

The carving suggests at once Coptic work of the sixth and seventh centuries, not only in technique but also in the choice of motives. The vine decoration and scenes of men and animals are not uncommon in the wood, bone, and ivory carvings of Coptic Egypt. Exact parallels of the birds on the Morgan plaques may be found, for example, on the ivory No. 7115 in Strzygowski's² Catalogue of the Cairo Museum. This piece is attributed to the fifth or sixth century; it may well be earlier than the Morgan plaques, since the male figure represented on it is

¹ Nos. 253.67 and 254.67. Goldschmidt, *op. cit.* Nos. 69 and 70, Plate XXVIII.

² J. Strzygowski, *Koptische Kunst*, No. 7115.

vastly superior to the crudely blocked-out hunter of the New York ivories. The vine motive is found on a large group of Coptic bone carvings in the Kaiser Friedrich Museum, Berlin,



FIGURE 3.—BACK OF PLAQUE, FIGURE 1; PROBABLY COPTIC, VI-VII CENTURIES.

attributed to the seventh century.¹ Another ivory (Cat. No. 616) in the same Museum, related to this group, shows two birds flanking a date-palm, a composition recalling the design on one of the Morgan plaques.

¹ O. Wulff, *Beschreibung der Bildwerke der Christlichen Epochen. I. Altchristliche Bildwerke*, pp. 144 ff.

It is pointed out in the Catalogue of the Berlin Museum¹ that the palm tree motive and the vine decoration just noted on the Berlin carvings were derived by Coptic Egypt from Syria. The



FIGURE 4.—BACK OF PLAQUE, FIGURE 2; PROBABLY COPTIC, VI-VII CENTURIES.

prominence given to these motives in the carving of the Morgan plaques, to say nothing of such unusual features in Coptic art as the fabulous winged animal and the hunter, with a slain animal over his shoulder, who seizes the antlers of a stag, makes one

¹ See also Strzygowski, *Jb. Preuss. Kunsts.* 1904, pp. 342 ff.

hesitate to assign the ivories in question to Egypt without referring to the possibility of a Syrian origin. At the same time, I think stylistic evidence warrants us in describing the earlier carving on the Morgan plaques as probably Coptic, under Syrian influence, of the sixth or seventh century.

JOSEPH BRECK.

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART.
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